Harold Armstrong ("Henry G. Aikman").

The Author of "Zell"

HOW Harold Armstrong, Detroit lawyer, became "Henry G. Aikman," successful novelist, was recently disclosed by Alfred A. Knopf, the publisher, in announcing a new novel by Mr. Armstrong, reviewed in this issue of the book section. In 1919 Mr. Armstrong was a practicing lawyer in Detroit, a member of the firm of Carey, Armstrong & Weadock. Before he entered the legal profession he had done newspaper reporting, and his love for writing persisting, he turned out short stories from time to time. He then determined that he wanted to follow Meredith and Hardy more than Blackstone and Chase, and he set aside a year in which to make good—or return to the law. He obtained a year's leave of absence from his firm, agreeing not to use his own name as author until—and if—he should make good in the writing game and permanently give up the law. With his wife, who was well known as director of children's pageants in Detroit, and their daughter, he moved to New York for his "writing year."

About that time H. L. Mencken, editor of *The Smart Set*, undertook publicly to find a publisher for any meritorious manuscript that had "gone the rounds" unsuccessfully. Mr. Armstrong sent in the manuscript of a novel, "Zell." "Zell," by "Henry G. Aikman," took the popular fancy. It was widely praised by the critics, and the central character, Avery Zell, joined the company of Lulu Bett, Felix Fay and Carol Kennicott as the best known fiction characters of the year.

Harold H. Armstrong was born near Morenci, Mich., in 1884. He was graduated from the Detroit Central High School in 1901 and from the University of Michigan in 1905. He played football and handball and was on the cross country team at Michigan, but—more important—was an editor of the *Michigan Daily*, the college newspaper. While he was still at college he worked as a reporter on the Detroit *News* and *Tribune*. Later he was a law stenographer, studying law at the same time, and was admitted to the bar in 1907.

New Fiction

Continued from Page Fifteen.

it is sound workmanship, free from any factitious or sensational trickery and depending for its values upon the portrayal of everyday human nature.

He is also well inspired in keeping to an atmosphere wherein he is at home. A good deal of the story is staged in law offices and in court, though they are but backgrounds. But they make very good backgrounds, and comparatively few novelists of the more recent vintages seem to have any real knowledge of them. The essence of the book is a study in marriage and in the possibilities of the sudden development of character under stimulus. The hero, Kenneth Gramling, is at first a futile, timid person who does not get on, because, as the senior partner of the firm for which he is a clerk elegantly remarks, in the now quite familiar phrase, "he hasn't any guts." There isn't any fight in him and "he'll resort to almost any dodge to get out of trying a case."

But he marries, and ultimately, like the traditional woodchuck, he climbs, because he has to. The girl, Miriam, who leads him to this lesson is a lovably feminine young woman, but she was not primarily intended by nature for poverty. The gradually increasing discomforts of not having enough to live on slowly bring about minor conflicts, nerve wracking disagreements and misunderstands between the couple, who really love each other but who manage to get on each other's nerves. Gramling also comes to think that he is a failure; that he simply cannot earn enough to justify himself and he is headed for wreckage. But then comes a shock that brings him to. Miriam is suddenly brought down with acute appendicitis, and finding her in a hospital ward jolts the timid husband into action. And he rises to the occasion.

He manifests his ability in a hard fought trial, wherein his anger and dissatisfaction with himself drive him into genuine efficiency, so that at the end of the case the crabbed old judge, by way of compliment, tells him that he is the "meanest, nastiest lawyer" he had come upon in some time, adding: "That's the trouble with this whole bunch of young lawyers. . . . They're too damn polite. They don't know how to fight." Gramling has now learned how to fight and means to keep it up. As to the other phase of his problem, he reaches the conclusion that now that he has found himself his marriage will turn out all right.

"After all," he reflects, "marriage can be no finer, no better, than the two people it unites. No stronger than its weaker link. Marriage is personal, individual; you can't generalize much about it!" A sage conclusion which, in spite of its obviousness, is really far more profound than the moral to be drawn from a good deal of recent analytical theorizing.

All of Mr. Armstrong's people are well vitalized; the reader will recognize them all as folk he has met, and that is a severe test to apply to any story. Incidentally, it is pleasant to meet peope who have no strange, recondite soul sorrows to puzzle us—people whose troubles and whose solutions of their difficulties are very humanly familiar to the ordinary human being who is not a specialist in phychoanalysis.

ABDICATION. By Edmund Candler. E. P. Dutton & Co.

TO throw light upon all the dark corners of the political and social tangle in India is a difficult task for a novelist. It is easy and productive of good dramatic effects to isolate some particular element and treat it in the form of a story. Many more or less competent novelists have done that, more or less successfully, but Mr. Candler has undertaken the far more difficult task of trying to make a picture of the whole. His theme is the racial conflict as it may affect the whole attitude of the British Government in India, even, some predict, to the result of a real abdication of all rule. That theme is too heavy for entirely effective handling in this form of fiction. The book is immensely interesting, and parts of it stand out as admirable short stories, but the disquisition as a whole buries the novel as a novel. In fact, it is not a novel at all, although the characters, except Gandhi, are fictitious and there is a thin thread of what might be called plot.

One feels sure, however, that each of the many people studied and shown in action is drawn from the life by a keen eyed observer. There is Riley, the "B. A. Oxon," ex-soldier and enthusiast, who came to the East in a rather romantic frame of mind and fell into the war instead of following the course of adventure he had planed. He becomes a believer in Indian Nationalism, "Swaraj," complete independence, and feels that as the British have promised self-government, the logical thing to do is for them to get out entirely, though he is under no delusions as to India's capacity for self-government. Skene, the skeptical head of the Department of Education, asks him—"And let the Indians go to the devil in their own way?" to which Riley replies: "I'd rather they went there alone than that we went with them in a mutually abhorrent embrace."

The other views of the case are also adequately stated; that of the bureaucrats, the moderates, and others. Old Skene quotes Lawrence's credo. "We are here by our own moral superiority, by the force of circumstance and by the will of Providence . . . and in doing the best we can for the people we are bound by our conscience and not theirs." Riley finally gives it up and wanders off into Tibet.

Among the natives the central figure is the always pathetic and finally tragic Banarsi Das, a "failed B. A."; who represents the childish, vacillating inefficiency of the Hindu who is "educated" but has nothing to do. His career ends in insanity. In contrast to him are various types of fanatics, Moslem and Hindu. Gandhi himself appears briefly, giving the impression of saintship and disinterestedness, but the final word about him is old Skene's, who writes: "Your Mahatma is becoming too sophisticated a saint to my mind—too much of the Jesuit about him." The course of events since the book was written, a few months ago, apparently justifies that estimate.

In contrast to Gandhi Mr. Candler shows a professional agitator, of the tub thumping class, who ends by stirring up a riot and getting sent to the Andamans. It is a very full gallery of Indian portraits and a vigorously stimulative book, though it leaves the whole problem in the air—where, as a matter of fact, it still is.

THE SHORN LAMB—By Emma Speed Sampson. Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Company.

MRS. SAMPSON has a happy knack of carrying a sentimental tale, built out of more or less familiar material, but treated with a fresh vivacity of her own up to a point where it ends just short of being treacly. And at her best she rises above the conventional to real originality of perception, as in the handling of the wicked old negro woman, "Aunt Peachy" of this story. Her folk are not quite stock characters, though some of them come pretty near to that, and the quality of the whole is uneven. But it makes a pleasant, entertaining story.

The "shorn lamb" of the title is a queer young girl, very much an orphan, as she has lost not only her actual parents but a successive assortment of step-parents at the moment the story opens. She is pitchforked by the fates to the home of her old grandfather in Virginia, and a family of relatives who were not aware of her existence. En route she falls in with the necessary young hero, who just happens to be headed for the same village, and is the son of another old planter. It is an artificial plot, but well managed. The main theme, however, is not really the development of either little Rebecca in her new environment or the successful reform instituted by the intelligent Mr. Philip, but the negroes. Of these there are two sets; one good and one very bad. Interest centers in old Aunt Peachy, who has been a sort of Voodoo priestess and who has managed to dominate her masters and employers for many years. The good negroes we have met before; they are satisfactorily real "niggers" and do very well, but there is an unusually vivid quality in the old sorceress, with her "conjuring" and spells and general malevolence. After an outbreak she is cautioned to "lay low," to which she retorts: "Well, I wa' a layin' low, as low as a snake's hips." In the end she rises from such picturesque phrases as that to equally picturesque action. Her death is a strikingly grewsome business.

The two old Southern families, one a run down clan, the other a survival of efficiency, are well done in their main lines, though some of the minor characters are a little wooden. But the total is a worth while book.

THE SECRET TELEPHONE—By William Le Quex. James A. McCann Company.

AN ingenious narrative, machine made, told by one of half a dozen Englishmen who possess the knack of writing workmanlike yarns of the London underworld apparently without undergoing any serious mental strain in the process. Arthur Heather, an invalided officer, runs through a handsome fortune and becomes the paid tool of the international scoundrel who runs the Golden Owl, a notorious night club, for the purpose of providing himself with opportunities for highly colored and profitable crime. In these and similar pages the drab London fronts assume the mysterious and fascinating aspect of Robert Louis Stevenson's "New Arabian Nights." Even dreary Bayswater takes on possibilities. A "Young Man with the Cream Tarts" may be momentarily expected in the most commonplace of public houses. Behind the closed blinds of any residence of a dismal side street may lurk the sinister activities of a "Suicide Club."

In many of the chapters of "The

Continued on Page Twenty-three.